

Painter Brian Burke's macabre caricatures now at Lead Gallery

By REGINA HACKETT
PI ART CRITIC

Brian Burke's paintings not only seize the eye, they hold it. Their appeal exerts itself in stages over time and culminates in powerful and enduring experiences.

He's currently filling the back room of Lead Gallery with portions of his "Mr. Man" series, all in oil on rectangular canvases seldom more than 50 inches high by 40 inches wide or vice versa. Although he's considered one of the rising stars of eastern Canadian figurative painting, his work is better than his resumé.

Looking at his macabre caricatures of human folly — his version of "power corrupts" portrait painting — many will think, I've seen this before, and they'll be right.

Burke harkens back not only to the German Expressionists (the Otto Dix vein) and French caricature (Honoré Daumier), but further back to the medieval chroniclers of hellfire.

That's Burke's first level, his ability to portray a corporate elite ravaged by its own inner alienations. With this theme he immediately connects, and then connects again on a deeper level.

In the mid-1970s he studied with Eric Fischl at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, before Fischl moved from non-representational to figurative painting. What Fischl developed in the 1980s took Burke a little longer: a way to invest the figure and the space around it with the formal values of an abstraction.

In "Vestments," a clotted, dark red square hangs amid scruffy yellows supported by an open area of deepening tan. Essentially, Burke has taken a late Rothko painting and twisted it into a room. The red's a rear wall, the yellow is its sides and tan is the floor. The grandeur of the space amplifies

ART REVIEW

■ **Brian Burke.** Lead Gallery, 1022 First Ave. Through Nov. 30. Hours: Mondays-Wednesdays, 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.; Thursdays-Fridays, 11:30 a.m.-12:30 a.m., and Saturdays, 1 p.m.-midnight.

■ **Ben Moore.** Foster/White Gallery, 311½ Occidental Ave. S. Through Sept. 27. Hours: Mondays-Saturdays, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m., Sundays, noon-5 p.m.

■ **Judy Hill.** Grover/Thurston Gallery, 309 Occidental Ave. S. Through Sept. 26. Hours: Tuesdays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

the squat figures placed there and gives them a tragic dimension.

"Black Tie" offers gorgeous blue and black paint scribbled with large motions into a kind of arc. Beneath it, illuminated by a glare of yellow, pass a trio of businessman. Closest to the foreground is a relatively untainted youth. Behind him is the man of middle age whose features are starting to blur and behind him, the walking dead.

Why does this morality play work? Because its painted figures function not just as figures but as pure passages of blurred light and encroaching dark. They are emblems and essences, improvised into being with an awkward and riveting beauty.

Ben Moore has been blowing glass in Seattle for more than two decades. Although internationally known, he's certainly not a star by the gaudy standards of the glass art world.

And yet next to his broad-brimmed bowls, now on view at Foster/White Gallery, the work of a lot of those who are stars looks frivolous



Canadian painter Brian Burke's "Supplicant" is from his "Mr. Man" series, a portion of which is on view at Lead Gallery.

and grandiose. Moore represents the quiet perfection of craft values. He rejects the decorative and aims at the essence of a thing. His colors verge on non-being: milky whites and translucent tans, faint pinks, bleached yellows. They serve only to emphasize the forms, the bowls that have become their own universes.

Portland's **Judy Hill** has made a considerable impression in the 1990s with small, exquisitely painted glass figures. Cracked and intense, they

look as if they've imploding under the pressure of their solitary existences.

Her show at Grover/Thurston Gallery is a serious misstep. In adding ceramic heads to her glass bodies, she has ruined her strongest effects. Her new work is flat-footed, literal and cute. Seldom have I seen such a steep fall from grace.

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